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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

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WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: March 13, 2008

Austrian Islamists Sentenced to Jail

¶1. Mohamed M. and Mona S., an Austrian Muslim couple accused of involvement in the production and posting on the internet of a video message threatening attacks against Austria, have been found guilty of membership of a terrorist organization, namely al Qaeda. A Vienna court sentenced Mohamed M. late on Wednesday to four years and his wife to 22 months in prison. The couple was detained in September 2007 on suspicion of posting a video message on the Internet threatening attacks in Austria and Germany, and demanding the two countries withdraw their troops from Afghanistan.

Constitutional Court President Stepping Down

¶2. The President of Austria's Constitutional Court, Karl Korinek, has announced that he is retiring from his post because of health problems. Mr. Korinek, who is 67, will formally leave his post at the end of April. He has been a member of the Court since 1978 and President since 2003, according to ORF TV's prime time news Zeit im Bild I on Wednesday.

Austria Marks 70th Anniversary of Annexation

¶3. Commemorations marking the 70th anniversary of the annexation of Austria by Germany concluded Wednesday with a "Night of Silence" in central Vienna's Heldenplatz, where Hitler announced the "Anschluss" in 1938. Participants lit 80,000 candles, one for every Austrian victim of the Nazi regime, and the names of each victim were displayed via projector throughout the night. Earlier Wednesday, the Austrian Parliament held a special session to mark the 70th anniversary of the country's annexation. Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer told the gathering that "no compensation could ever diminish the wrong that was done to victims" of the Nazis. President Heinz Fischer used the occasion to appeal for more cooperation between politicians in Austria and said the success of the Second Republic was based on the ability of politicians to build bridges.

Traces of Austrian Missing in Iraq

¶4. The Austrian Foreign Ministry has confirmed that a fingerprint and DNA sample from Austrian Bert Nussbaumer, who was kidnapped in Iraq nearly 18 months ago, has been found in Iraq. The new information was forwarded to the Austrian authorities by their US colleagues, the media say. Mr. Nussbaumer worked for a US security firm and was kidnapped November 16, 2006 with four US colleagues

during an ambush in the southern Iraq town of Safwan, a Sunni Arab city in a predominantly Shiite area. In a press briefing for the media yesterday, the Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry, Johannes Kyrle, declined to comment on a report in mass-circulation weekly News (March 13 issue) that the DNA came from a severed finger, one of five reportedly sent to US officials. Mass-circulation weekly News in its March 13 issue headlines "Five fingers from the kidnap victims," and reports that the "US authorities received one finger from Bert Nussbaumer, the Austrian who was kidnapped in Iraq, last week." According to the weekly, "late last week, the US authorities passed on explosive information to the Republic of Austria: They had received five severed fingers, which DNA analysis clearly identified as belonging to US citizens Paul Reuben, Jonathan Cote, John Young and Josh Munns. The fifth was undoubtedly from Austrian Bert Nussbaumer." The weekly continues: "At this point, no official statements have been made as to how the US authorities came to be in possession of these five severed fingers. It has been confirmed, though, that DNA testing has clearly identified each of them as belonging to one of the five abductees. Presently, detailed medical testing is still ongoing, which is to provide information on whether the hostages were alive when their fingers were cut off. At this point, there is no evidence to confirm this beyond doubt, the authorities involved in the case have said. At the same time, rumors have started to circulate that the analyses had revealed some of the US hostages were already dead at the time their fingers had been severed. The Austrian Interior, Foreign and Defense Ministries have been dealing with this explosive matter intensively since the beginning of this week. Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik is in close contact with the US authorities." News also points out that the kidnappers had not come forward with demands to the Republic of Austria, neither politically nor financially.

Mass-circulation tabloid Oesterreich headlines "Austrian hostage: finger sent by mail" and writes that two and a half years after Nussbaumer's abduction, the "terrorist mailed one of his fingers to the US authorities. It is unclear whether the Austrian is still alive." According to the daily, it was a "gruesome package, the US authorities in Iraq received late last week. It contained five severed fingers! Quickly, it became clear: One of these fingers was from Bert Nussbaumer, the Austrian who was kidnapped in Iraq, a DNA analysis has confirmed. The US authorities, who are said to have received the body parts on February 20, and perhaps kept that knowledge of themselves for two and a half weeks, informed the Austrian Ambassador to Amman last weekend, on the occasion of his visit to Iraq. " While the Austrian authorities "neither confirmed nor denied" that the mailed DNA samples were, indeed, severed fingers, "US sources have confirmed that the material in question really was made up of five finger fragments: 'Its the fingertips,' an insider told Oesterreich, and 'they're big enough pieces to take fingerprints from.'" The finger fragments are "said to have been in a progressive state of decomposition. Still, experts have been able to take DNA samples and fingerprints." The "US forensic analyses are still in full swing: One of the many riddles: The experts are unsure whether the severed fingers are from persons who are still alive or already dead." Oesterreich quotes the mother of one of the hostages, Sharon Debrabander, as saying the US families had complained bitterly in the past that they were "left completely in the dark" by the US government. Nussbaumer's family was informed on the latest developments a few days ago by the Austrian authorities, according to Oesterreich.

In liberal daily Der Standard, foreign affairs editor and Middle East expert Gudrun Harrer writes: "The only decisive detail, the information the family is waiting for, will likely not be provided: Proof that Bert Nussbaumer is still alive. Even if the DNA traces, whatever they may be, have been identified as being from the Austrian, they reveal nothing about the state or the whereabouts of the hostage and his four American fellow sufferers. For reasons of respectability, this newspaper needs to work with the official version. Thus, the working hypothesis for all persons concerned continues to be that Nussbaumer is alive. (...) Cause for concern is how the new information - naturally also an official version - made its way from the US to Austria: On the occasion of the Austrian Ambassador to Baghdad's accreditation, the Austrians were allowed to pick up the news about the 'DNA find' in Baghdad. The Americans are in no hurry to share their information with anyone. But that's common knowledge; as is the fact that such stories are usually

leaked to the tabloids by one of the Austrian ministries involved in these cases."

The Standard also quotes Mark Koscielski, a friend of Paul Reuben's, one of the Americans kidnapped with Nussbaumer, as claiming the Austrian is possibly already dead. Body parts of Nussbaumer had been found in Iraq. "One of my sources called me early this morning, and told me Bert's DNA matches that of the discovered body parts," Koscielski said.

Centrist daily Die Presse, mass-circulation provincial daily Kleine Zeitung, semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung, ORF radio and television, independent provincial daily Salzburger Nachrichten, mass-circulation tabloid Kronen Zeitung and mass-circulation daily Kurier also report on the issue.

Location Unclear Of Austrian Hostages in North Africa

¶5. The whereabouts of Austrian tourists Wolfgang Ebner und Andrea Kloiber, who were kidnapped in North Africa in February, remain unclear. A group calling itself the Al Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb is believed to be holding the pair. An Algerian newspaper has suggested the hostages may have been taken from Tunisia to Algeria, and that they might currently be held in Mali. Meanwhile, Algeria and Tunisia have been blaming each other for the lack of security making the kidnapping possible, and the authorities are waiting for the kidnappers to come forward with demands for the couple's release, says centrist daily Die Presse.

Martin's Parliamentary Immunity Lifted

¶6. A European parliamentary committee has voted to withdraw parliamentary immunity from Austrian MEP Hans-Peter Martin over a defamation case. Martin, who made a name for himself as an anti-corruption campaigner, blamed an error in his parliamentary allowances on his then accountant, Christoph Matznetter, who later became State Secretary for Finances in the Austrian government. Matznetter's old firm is now taking the issue to court, saying such blame casts the firm in a poor light and amounts to defamation. Martin has meanwhile confirmed that an out-of-court settlement is being negotiated, according to ORF TV's prime time news Zeit im Bild I on Wednesday.

Eliot Spitzer Resigns

¶7. The Governor of New York state, Eliot Spitzer (D), has resigned in the wake of allegations he had arranged to hire a call girl. Spitzer made a name for himself as an investigator of organized crime, financial crime and prostitution. Announcing his resignation, Spitzer made a public apology, saying he was "deeply sorry" he did not live up to people's expectations, says ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal.

Clinton Aide Ferraro Resigns

¶8. A key member of Hillary Clinton's campaign has resigned over her comment that Democratic rival Barack Obama would not be ahead in the race for the White House if he were not black. Geraldine Ferraro, a Vice-Presidential candidate in 1984, announced she was stepping down from an honorary role on Clinton's finance committee. Hillary Clinton has said she disagreed with the remarks, while Barack Obama argued Ferraro's comments were "ridiculous and wrong-headed," reports ORF radio early morning news Morgenjournal.

Kilner